



Building a History

Touring the Pearson Museum at SIU School of Medicine in Springfield is like taking a step back in time. Among its hundreds of medical artifacts — some unique and others bizarre — a stately turn-of-the-century pharmacy stands in one corner, stocked and ready for its next customer.

In the early 1900s, the pharmacy was a social gathering place where friends met around the soda fountain, and the local pharmacist was everybody's friend and confidante, caring for people as much as any physician.



Benjamin Victor

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to purchase
and transport
the thousands of
items of the
Lewis Drug Store
to the
Pearson Museum.**

The Pearson Museum recaptures this era with Lewis Drugs, a pharmacy filled with approximately 5,000 authentic items from the early 1900s. These include a marble-topped prescription counter, an 1890s soda fountain that still works, an “ice cream” style table and chairs, stained glass windows, antique ice cream scoops and 21 mortars and pestles that line the top of the two walls filled with 207 apothecary jars.

The name Lewis Drugs refers to pharmacist Ed Lewis, who amassed an extensive collection of pharmaceutical items over the past 60 years. “I collected everything that was ever in a drug store from the Civil War up to the present,” says Lewis, who has not yet retired from his 53-year-career as a pharmacist in the same store his father owned in Canton, Illinois.

Lewis began collecting the pharmaceutical artifacts in the 1940s when many pharmacies were remodeling. “They were throwing out everything from earlier periods,” he says. He restored many of the items himself and even designed his house around the idea of reconstructing a drug store in the basement of his home.

During Illinois’ sesquicentennial celebrations in 1968, Lewis displayed his pharmacy as the Spoon River Drug Store to some 10,000 visitors at the Illinois State Fair. “It took two truck loads to get all of the display from Canton to Springfield,” says Lewis. It was at the Fair that the late Emmet Pearson, M.D., one of the Museum’s founders, realized the importance of Lewis’ exhibit.

“Dr. Pearson could sell ice boxes to Eskimos,” says Lewis of Dr. Pearson’s

persuasive efforts to buy the exhibit. Dr. Pearson envisioned the pharmacy as a teaching tool for the School of Medicine, which was still in its planning stages. John Krellin, an early School of Medicine professor hired to teach students about the history of medicine and pharmacy called Lewis’ collection “the world’s finest museum” of pharmaceutical artifacts because it was all collected from a small area in Illinois.

Bringing Lewis’ Spoon River Drug Store, renamed Lewis Drugs, to the School was a challenge, and Dr. Pearson enlisted the help of Benjamin B. Victor, a respected Springfield pharmacist. “‘Mr. Ben’ was somebody very special,” says his wife, Devera, calling her husband by his nickname. Benjamin Victor died in 1988.

A pharmacist for 50 years, Victor was the founder and chairman of Illinois Thrifty Drugs and a great supporter of the School of Medicine. Recalls Devera, “He felt very excited about the prospect of having a school that certainly has succeeded in being not only a community asset but an asset to all the surrounding areas.”

As the School was being established, the Victors were included in the architectural committee. “Ben believed in quality,” Devera says proudly. “And he was thrilled that a school of great stature would be here in Springfield.”

Benjamin Victor also served as chair of the fund-raising campaign for the Pearson Museum. He led the crusade to raise \$20,000, the amount needed to purchase and transport the thousands of fragile items in the Spoon River Drug Store to Springfield. A daunting task it was, but “Ben

believed in aspiring to something a bit higher than what you thought you could do," says Devera. He dove headlong into raising this money, personally traveling many miles to appeal to leading pharmaceutical companies for their support.

"Benjamin provided both the muscle and the commitment for the project," says Phil Davis, Ph.D., director of the Pearson Museum. "His generosity and vision made the acquisition and installation of the pharmacy exhibit a reality."

Victor's interest in pharmacy began at the age of 14 when he was an apprentice pharmacist in Springfield. In 1935, he founded and became chairman of Illinois Thrifty Drug Co. A central Illinois staple for many decades, there were 17 Thrifty Drug Company stores in Springfield, Decatur, Alton, and Pekin.

The stores' motto reflects Victor's integrity: "We would not give your family medicine that we would not give our own."

Mrs. Victor also noted that her husband always thought of his employees and his customers as part of that family. "When they had financial or marital problems they would go to 'Mr. Ben.'" With kindness and understanding, he even helped budding pharmacists attend pharmacy school with the hope that they would come back and work for Thrifty Drug Company.

Throughout his career, Victor's philanthropy extended far beyond his family and his employees. Not only was the School blessed with his contributions, but the Springfield community also benefited from the Victor's generosity.

In memory of their son, Michael, the

couple established the Michael Victor II Art Library 36 years ago at the Springfield Art Association. Gifts in support of St. John's Hospital and Memorial Medical Center were likewise part of this community commitment.

Despite his generosity, Mr. Ben refused any kudos for his efforts. Devera remembers: "He never felt that he deserved any special praise. He just said, 'I did what I wanted to do and what I needed to do.' His humility was a defining part of his personality."

Though the Victor's are modest, the School has always been thankful for their contributions. Now, a wall dedicated to the five founding members of the Museum, including Benjamin Victor, stands at the entrance to the Pearson Museum. The other four sharing that honor are Richard Moy, M.D., retired dean and provost of the School of Medicine; Emmet Pearson, M.D., medical historian and the Museum's namesake; Glen Davidson, Ph.D., former director of the Museum; and Gordon Peckham, the Museum's first curator.

These men understood the importance of preserving medical history and combined efforts to shape the Museum. As dean of the medical school, Dr. Moy fostered support for the Museum among the SIU faculty; Dr. Pearson donated his personal collection of medical artifacts; Dr. Davidson spearheaded the publication of books and monographs by the Museum; and Mr. Peckham prepared many of the Museum's display areas.

Benjamin Victor died October 10, 1988, after battling Alzheimer disease. Since then, Mrs. Victor has continued her husband's legacy at SIU with reg-

ular donations to the School's Alzheimer research programs.

She also is an active community volunteer for the arts, though she is modest about her contributions. "You do something and it's meaningful to you," she says. "The joy of helping people is the greatest satisfaction in life."

More than 20 years after its founding, the Museum is still a great source of education for students, faculty, staff and the thousands of visitors who parade through to learn about times gone by.

The Museum also provides a comfortable atmosphere for meetings, exhibitions and social occasions. For many years, the pharmacy's soda fountain was used to serve ice cream during social events.

Over the years, more donations have been added to the ever-rotating collections in the Museum. But the Lewis Drugs pharmacy exhibit is a unique and valued addition, a solid centerpiece in a fascinating and rare history museum. It is a testament to the generosity of its founders and a landmark for lovers of medical history. And it stands as one of the highlights of the Pearson Museum, a permanent tribute to generous supporters like Benjamin Victor. ■

The Pearson Museum is located at 801 N. Rutledge St., Springfield, Ill. The museum is open to the public on Tuesdays from 9 a.m. to 3:30 p.m., and by appointment. For more information, contact curator Barbara Mason at 217-785-2128.

www.siumed.edu/medhum/html/The_Pearson_Museum/the_pearson_museum.htm